

Keitelman Gallery

Nelly Agassi – The longest night ever

“Out of the Black”

Nelly Agassi's face, still and frozen, surrounded by tousled hair, welcomes visitors to the gallery. Her face, familiar to those who have been following her work since the late 1990s, appears in the same format, hardly changing from one work to the other: it captures the area between the top of her head and her chest, while she performs a single, repetitive action: washing her face with coarse salt, rubbing her chest with sandpaper until it bleeds, smiling at length until her face muscles betray her, or turning the back of her neck towards the viewers and simply breathing. Taken together, these actions appear as a series of private rituals that touch upon a core of pain. Or perhaps upon the very core of her being, upon the very essence of things.

Although these works may be defined as videos, they are in fact traces of performances (usually without an audience), and may well be described as "sculpted videos." The Longest Night Ever was created in this same format. In this instance, Nelly Agassi stands motionless while her hair is tossed by the wind, alternately concealing and revealing her face. One may momentarily imagine a large fan blowing air at her head in the tradition of fashion shoots; yet this cliché is so obvious, that it almost immediately gives way to an image of a powerful gust of natural wind. One way or another, the use – or circumvention – of this hackneyed visual formula greets us at the entrance to the exhibition: the artist's serious, frozen face, surrounded by disheveled hair, welcomes the viewers like the face of a mysterious, enigmatic hostess, while metaphorically alluding to an inner storm.

Shall we enter?

The walls are hung with pencil drawings on paper, whose lines vary in thickness. These lines – thin and pale in some instances and bold and dark in others – form tangled arrangements that call to mind a dense thicket. Only at second and third glance does one come to understand the system underlying these convoluted drawings, so that their chaotic appearance suddenly comes to resemble a carefully planned structure. The first drawings in this series featured a horizontal line stretching across the sheet of paper. The tangled coils, knots, or cocoons appeared above this line, whose function was to order, organize and separate – to serve as a partition of sorts between darkness and light, dry land and sea, above and below. Over time, as these drawings evolved, the horizon line disappeared. It had become unnecessary.

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The coils themselves internalized this disciplining, organizing line, while simultaneously containing the chaos underlying creation. When one studies these drawings one notes with astonishment the degree to which they embody, like a sort of capsule, the principle characteristics of Nelly Agassi's oeuvre as a whole: chaos that is expressed through order, repetitive actions that produce meaning and that are suffused by a ritual quality, events that are at once minimalist and dramatic, agitation and calm, as well as a combination of qualities related to different artistic mediums – drawings that contain sculptural elements, performances that contain elements of drawing (and vice versa). This combination of elements reveals a concern with formalist issues that is simultaneously a concern with the most existential themes. Lines, and coils.

Only following the encounter with these images does the visitor come across the large clusters of flower-like black knots, which may be considered to be the climactic part of this exhibition. These flowers are made of bolts of black satin ribbon, which are held together by a round Perspex frame. Some of these bolts are still rolled up, while others have been unfurled and flow across the floor, creating an image of a frothing black stream that trails off in different directions. Here too, one may detect the same combination of control and freedom. These clusters are simultaneously characterized by restraint (a single form, a single color, a single material) and by a form of excess (something is bubbling over, something is overflowing); their creation process is both simple and labor-intensive, yet they are simultaneously imbued with asymbolic charge.

Accordingly, the colors characteristic of Nelly Agassi's works – red, skin color, or white – are carefully chosen. The use of black in this exhibition appears as a natural addition to this palette, which is at once Zen-like and dramatic. In the past, when she exhibited her large dresses works, she would enact a performance at every exhibition opening, in the course of which she would wear the red, skin-colored, or white dress – at once a second skin, a place and a territory. These performances were baptismal ceremonies for the exhibitions, conducted in preparation for their public display. She would stand motionless, simply breathing as she faced the audience, before removing the dress and hanging it on the wall.

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The black clusters of knots featured in the current exhibition may be thought of as a sculptural expansion that grows out of the open necklines of these dresses – out of the same area of the body from which most of Nelly Agassi's works grow, the same area where the act of breathing takes place.

This time, the black bolts of ribbon flow directly out of the wall, unmediated by the presence of a dress and a hanger; the wall is thus transformed into a substitute for the body, while the bolts of satin become a negative image of the artist's chest – transformed into a frothing, knotted tangle.

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